
Democracy & Education

The Value of Conflict and Disagreement in Democratic Teacher Education

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Abstract

Deliberative democracy surfaces disagreements so that people holding conflicting stances understand each other's reasons for the purpose of decision-making. Democratic education approaches should provide students with the opportunity to learn and practice how to address conflict in the collective decision-making process. In this paper, I examine the Foxfire Course for Teachers, a professional development retreat in which teachers learn to practice democratic teaching by themselves experiencing democratic decision-making. In particular, a series of disagreements among course participants is analyzed in detail to understand the learning that resulted and the conditions that supported that learning. As a result of this experiential learning opportunity, teachers came to realize the importance of allowing students to experience and reason through disagreement although it may cause discomfort. Teachers also came to view democratic participation as a developmental process that requires practice.

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Introduction

AS ESTERLING, FUNG, and Lee (2015) point out, disagreement is simultaneously a condition for and challenge to democratic deliberation. Through the exchange of arguments and their justifications, conflict and disagreement often arises. Ideally, this is not where the discussion ends but rather is a starting point for participants to gain insights into the positions of others and, hopefully, gain deeper insights into their own positions (Bohman & Rehg, 1997). From the perspective of education, conflict and disagreement are central to the educative value of employing democratic processes in the classroom. By listening to others who disagree and discussing differences,

participants' views can be transformed. Several researchers have studied disagreement that arises as students discuss public issues in the classroom. However, there is a lack of research on disagreement that arises when students are empowered to make collective decisions over real resources with direct consequences.

This article examines the role of experiential learning and disagreement in democratic teacher education. I present a case study of the Foxfire Course for Teachers, a teacher professional development course that requires participating teachers to deliberate and make decisions about how they will learn about the

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Foxfire Approach, an educational approach that emphasizes learner autonomy and ongoing reflection (Harell, 2016; Smith & McDermott, 2016; Smith, 1994). The Foxfire Course for Teachers is the primary vehicle through which practicing teachers learn about the Foxfire Approach by experiencing deliberative decision-making over the course of a week spent together in the mountains of rural Georgia (Harell, 2016, 2019).

In this article, I argue that in order to prepare teachers to lead democratic education in their classrooms, we need to provide them with meaningful opportunities to deliberate with their peers and make collective decisions about resources. That means giving them power to make decisions, providing support to reflect on their decisions, and exercising restraint when conflict and disagreement arises. When making collective decisions, conflict often arises; however, facilitators cannot always anticipate where or how this may happen. As this article shows, democratic deliberation that allows teachers to experience conflict and resolution provides them with unique insights into the experience of being a student in a democratic classroom. These insights help teachers better anticipate their students' reactions to deliberative decision-making and better support them as they practice democratic deliberation in their classrooms. Additionally, this article shows that these types of experiences can be supported by facilitators who exercise restraint when faced with conflict and disagreement and help teacher participants channel their frustrations into reflective spaces that encourage sharing of differing opinions and the reasons behind them.

Literature Review

Deliberative Democracy

This study approaches democratic education from the perspective of deliberative democracy (Englund, 2006, 2010; Gutmann, 1999; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Many popular understandings of democracy focus on voting and representation; however, a richer conception of democracy regarding education must include the process by which people learn about themselves and others and make decisions collectively. The most prominent work in democratic thought recently has focused on deepening democracy by making it more deliberative in nature (Chappell, 2012). During this "deliberative turn" in the study of democracy (Dryzek, 2000), theorists have promoted a conception of democracy that goes beyond the process of aggregating votes to viewing it as a deeper engagement in communication, collective reasoning, and reflection among citizens. Deliberative democracy is fundamentally educative in nature because participants learn about public issues and clarify or change their own preferences through the process of deliberating together (Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Englund, 2000).

Deliberative democracy is defined as "uncoerced, other-regarding, reasoned, inclusive and equal debate" (Chappell, 2012, p. 7). These normative criteria determine the extent to which a decision-making process can be deemed deliberative. For this reason, democratic deliberation is often best supported by a moderator (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2005; Chappell, 2012) charged with upholding the normative criteria and ensuring that conflicts that arise are reflexively integrated into the deliberative process as objects of deliberation. By viewing democratic education through

the lens of deliberative democracy, the teacher's role becomes similar to that of a moderator of deliberative decision-making (Bradshaw, 2014).

Deliberation and Disagreement

One of the advantages of deliberative democracy over purely aggregative forms is that it allows us to better address conflict and disagreement. Deliberative democracy creates space for people holding conflicting stances to collectively reason across differences on terms of mutual respect (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009). Through this process, participants come to understand the reasons behind opposing stances, identify common ground, and in some cases, revise their positions. Furthermore, scholars of deliberative democracy have suggested that the surfacing of some disagreement can contribute to the quality of democratic deliberation. The existence of disagreement in deliberation prompts participants to generate more public and persuasive reasons (Esterling, Fung, & Lee, 2010; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002) and to consider opposing reasons (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). The surfacing of disagreements avoids premature consensus by addressing rather than avoiding points of conflict (Karpowitz & Mansbridge, 2005).

As Levine, Fung, and Gastil (2005) have pointed out, "Although people frequently change their views in the process of deliberation and come to understand one another's needs, values, and beliefs better, they rarely reach complete agreement" (p. 3). For this reason, deliberation is often followed by a method such as voting (Chappell, 2012, p. 161) that allows participants in the deliberation to lock in a provisional decision that can be revised later. This mechanism allows participants to see the results of a decision and use that information in future deliberation. Participants who disagree about a decision may find consensus after seeing the results of a provisional decision or they may revise a decision in a way that satisfies more people. Provisionality is a key component of the Foxfire Course for Teachers and the ways in which participating teachers experience deliberation.

Deliberation and disagreement in education

Despite debates in the literature on democratic education, most researchers and practitioners would agree that learning how to address disagreement is an important component of democratic learning. There are many existing approaches that are designed to have students engage with conflicting perspectives and controversial issues (Claire & Holden, 2007; Cowan & Maitles, 2012; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Structured Academic Controversy (SAC), developed by Johnson and Johnson (1988, 1993) as part of their work on cooperative learning, is an example of an approach that promotes engagement with conflicting perspectives. During a SAC, groups of students are given two conflicting opinions or courses of action on a policy issue. They are split into opposing teams that research and argue for one position before switching and completing the same task from the other side of the issue. By arguing for both positions, each participant comes to understand the arguments on both sides of an issue in a deeper way than might otherwise occur. Importantly, SAC is not a strictly adversarial exercise of debate; rather students are invited to step

outside of their assigned positions and deliberate about their own positions on the topic. This allows the group to either come to agreement on the issue or clarify their disagreements (Parker, 2011). Through the SAC process, students learn how to consider the strongest argument for opposing stances and learn that considering opposing stances helps us strengthen our understanding and reasons. For these reasons, SAC is “a useful model for deliberation in schools” (Parker, 2011, p. 1).

Given the innovative structure of this activity, much has been written about SAC in relation to deliberative democracy (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2014; Khourey-Bowers, 2006; Lo & Adams, 2018; Lo, 2017; Mead & Scharmann, 1994; Parker & Hess, 2001; Parker, 2011; Rossi, 2006; Uline, Tschannen-Moran, & Perez, 2003). While it is clear that SAC and similar teaching methods promote deliberation, such approaches do not provide opportunities to learn how to make collective decisions when disagreement exists. Students do not need to make a collective decision that will be implemented and impactful on their own lives.

While experiences with democratic teaching approaches such as participating in a SAC are fundamental to promoting democracy through education, students in democratic classrooms also benefit from deliberating over decisions that they have real power over. For example, Youth Lead the Way (<https://www.boston.gov/departments/youth-engagement-and-employment/youth-lead-change>) is a youth participatory budgeting initiative run out of the Boston mayor’s office that encourages young people in the city to collectively deliberate over how \$1 million will be spent. Democratic education that empowers students to decide together how they will learn allows students to practice a democratic skill in an authentic setting. There are real stakes and real impacts, and students participating in the deliberation have power over the outcomes. As in deliberative democracy more generally, when students are given the power to make decisions via deliberation, disagreements over what to do will arise. In these situations, students cannot “agree to disagree” because they need to move forward as a group with their decisions about the curriculum.

The Foxfire Approach and Deliberative Democratic Teacher Education

The Foxfire Approach is an example of a democratic teaching approach that allows students to exercise power over aspects of their learning in the classroom by practicing deliberative decision-making (Harell, 2016, 2019; Smith & McDermott, 2016). The Foxfire Approach has its origins in an English language arts classroom in Georgia in the 1960s when a teacher, desperate to find a way to engage his students, experimented with giving his students power to make decisions over the curriculum (Glickman, 2016; Oliver, 2011; Puckett, 1989; Rechtman, 2016). After deliberating about possibilities, the students decided to write, publish, and distribute a magazine about life in Appalachia called *Foxfire*. The magazine articles were later anthologized into a best-selling book (Wigginton, 1972) and many successful subsequent volumes. The success of this teaching experiment inspired many teachers and later became a generalized teaching approach that foregrounds student decision making (Smith & McDermott, 2016).

The Foxfire Course for Teachers is an example of professional development for teachers that promotes a form of democratic education rooted in the tradition of deliberative democracy. Each weeklong residential session brings together approximately 15 teachers from different backgrounds and two facilitators. During the week, the teachers engage with the Foxfire Approach by reading teacher accounts of these practices in action in *The Foxfire Course Book* and Dewey’s (1998) *Experience and Education*. In most teacher education courses, instructors unilaterally determine how class time is spent and what learning activities participants engage in. The Foxfire Course for Teachers is innovative in that facilitators come with no planned agenda for the week. Instead, they facilitate a deliberative session on the first day. During this session, participating teachers must deliberate and collectively decide the course design, activities, and schedule with full autonomy, as long as they meet the predetermined goals of the course. The facilitators refer to these predetermined goals as “the givens” of the course to emphasize that participants do not have the power to change them. Because of the structure of this course and the role the facilitators play in relation to the deliberative process, participants often experience conflicts and disagreements about what decisions to make. For these reasons, studying the Foxfire Course for Teachers offers insights into the role of disagreement in deliberative democracy as it relates to preparing teachers to lead democratic classrooms.

Methods and Data Sources

This study is an ethnographic multiple case study analysis (Stake, 2006). Participant observation field notes were collected during three separate weeklong sessions of the Foxfire Course for Teachers. In-depth interviews were conducted with the facilitators of the course and the participating teachers. All five of the facilitators from the three target sessions were interviewed and 39 of the 47 participating teachers were interviewed. The facilitators were all either university faculty or secondary school teachers. The participating teachers themselves ranged from preservice P12 teachers completing initial certification master’s degree programs to in-service teachers working in classrooms ranging from prekindergarten up through postsecondary. The majority of the participants were graduate students at one of two campuses of the same private liberal arts college.

Data in this study was analyzed first by transcribing all interviews and expanding field notes. Initially, the data was coded using first-cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2016). In particular, I used descriptive coding (Wolcott, 1994) and structural coding (Namey, Guest, Thairu & Johnson, 2008). In the second cycle of coding, I used theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to move beyond mere description. During theoretical coding, I employed memoing techniques (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008) to formulate the conception of democratic teacher education used in this study. This article draws primarily upon data from one of the three case studies in this larger study of the Foxfire Course for Teachers. During this week of the course, more so than the other two, there was open disagreement among the participating teachers.

Data

Working through Disagreement and Conflict

During each week of the Foxfire Course for Teachers, the facilitators lead a deliberative decision-making session wherein the participating teachers make decisions about how to approach and engage with the required course texts. Facilitators encourage participants to share their ideas about how to proceed and explain their reasoning for their positions. During two of the three sessions of the course in this study, the participants left this early session with a plan for the week that remained largely unchanged. During the third session, which is the focus of this article, the participants refused to plan beyond their next task citing their relative ignorance about the course texts at this early stage in the course. Instead of planning the entire week, the participants elected to make decisions about how to proceed after each activity. Once a planned activity concluded, the group would reflect on the experience and deliberate about what to do next. In this sense, group decisions were provisional, and participants felt empowered to suggest changes as the week progressed. The facilitators embraced this planned provisionality and encouraged the participants to debrief after each class session in order to share their experiences and suggest revised plans for upcoming activities. Rather than solving problems that arose for the participants, the facilitators channeled these discussions into planned debriefing sessions (Harell, 2019). In this sense, they supported the deliberation of the group.

The large group decided that during their discussions of *Experience and Education* they should form smaller groups based on their grade levels. The greatest disagreement and conflict of the week occurred within one small group. This group was composed of five secondary school teachers including Carly, Sandy, Joan, and Diane.¹ During their first small-group session on Monday afternoon, the group spent the majority of the 70 minutes allocated closely examining the arguments in the first two chapters of *Experience and Education*. As the session started, Carly suggested that their primary focus should be on understanding the text and then, if time allowed, drawing connections to the Foxfire Approach. She suggested that everyone take a few minutes to reflectively write about the chapters they had read in preparation for their group discussion. Sandy, who had previously been discussing an unrelated issue with one of the facilitators, joined the group after they had already started reflectively writing. After approximately three minutes, they began sharing their reactions to what they had read. While everyone in the group was making comments and asking questions, Carly was playing the role of a facilitator by bringing the group back to the text and posing guiding questions that she had come up with while reading and during her reflective writing. Joan described the first session like this:

The very first time we were doing the first small group meeting, right away Carly wanted to run the group. And so we did. We went along with it, and we did what she needed to do, which is process all of it. Because she's a literary type. You can tell she likes to process text.

1 All names that appear in this article are pseudonyms.

Carly, a high school English teacher, explained in an interview after the fact that she made these suggestions because she felt *Experience and Education* is a difficult text, and this is how she supports her students when they are engaging with this kind of reading.

Unlike the other small groups, who had finished discussing the text after approximately 25 minutes, Carly's group spent most of the 70 minutes deep in discussion about the text, with the occasional connection to their teaching practice or the Foxfire Approach. When the three small groups came back together to share their insights and debrief on the format of the small-group discussion, the other members of Carly's group became aware that the other groups were doing something different. Because the members of the other groups had not engaged as deeply with *Experience and Education* and thus had additional time to discuss other issues, some of the people from these groups suggested drastically cutting the time spent in small groups. Dan, a preservice English teacher, suggested that they could cut the time in half based on his group's experience. This received nods of support from around the room, including from members of Carly's small group. The group decided that the next session would focus on Chapter 3 of *Experience and Education* and the groups would only have 35 minutes before coming back together as a large group.

After the large group decided on the change to the time allotted, a student suggested that there also be a change to the format of how each group would share their insights. Instead of narrating their small-group discussion back to the large group, this student suggested that they develop an experiential activity to animate some concept from the chapter. Instead of reporting back after the small-group discussions, they would take turns facilitating activities for their peers. While everyone in the group seemed excited about this change, no one brought up the issue of time and the need to both discuss the text *and* plan an activity. As such, the discussion ended with allotting only 35 minutes for the discussion and planning of Chapter 3, a long and complex chapter. This time crunch was at the heart of the tension in Carly's group during the next session.

During the next small-group session, Sandy took more of an active role in convening the group and suggesting an agenda. The group did not reflectively write about the chapter at the outset as they had before. Instead Sandy suggested that they could trust that everyone had already read the chapter and therefore could move directly into brainstorming ideas about what activity they could plan for their peers. Ignoring this suggestion, Carly began flipping through the chapter and bringing up concepts from the text. She became very frustrated when Sandy and Joan responded to her comments by trying to move away from understanding the text to planning an activity for the whole group. Joan described the second session like this:

The second time we came around, it was funny because Sandy and I were both like, "Listen, we've read the book. Let's get down and do this." And [Carly's] frustration level went through the roof because she was like, "Wait a minute—we can't do that yet, because we haven't processed the text yet." She had to process it in a group, which is okay. There is nothing wrong with that learning style, but it was interesting.

Despite the efforts of Sandy and Joan to move beyond discussing the text, Carly continued to bring up passages and ask questions about the meaning of specific passages in the text. The other members of the small group remained quiet while Carly, Sandy, and Joan began to openly argue about what their group should be doing with their limited time. Following this session, in a private interview, Carly described the experience like this:

I already came into it thinking, "Thirty-five minutes? Why 35 minutes? Why not 45?" So I was feeling kind of frustrated about that already, knowing that that's really not a lot of time. There is no way we can have a discussion and come up with something to do. And then there is the intensity of it. I think this is also a clash of working styles. I think by processing verbally. I talk my way through something. I can't deliver a completed thought, and that was part of the frustration. They kept saying, "But what are we going to do? But what are we going to do?" And I was trying to get to what we were going to do by talking my way there. And the more I talked, the more it was, "But you're just talking; instead you should be saying what we're going to do." So that was the source of the frustration.

Carly also felt conflicted because she had been an early proponent of moving away from sitting in circles and discussing all day. She said, "I've been pretty vocal about how we need to do something. So, it was sort of that urgency about let's do something instead of just talk about it." While she wanted to plan activities to make the course more active, she did not see the sense in planning activities without first having a deep understanding of the text. Because she wanted to have both discussion and planning time, she suggested several times during the small-group session that they simply ignore the charge of the large group and discuss the chapter. At that point, they could then explain to the large group that they needed more time to plan a meaningful activity. Sandy argued that this was a violation of what the group had decided and began referring to the parameters of the small group as themselves "givens" that could not be negotiated. Joan described this exchange like this:

At one point, Carly wanted to change the givens for the small group, and [Sandy] said, "But wait a minute—we can't change the givens." Carly was talking about maybe changing the givens in the larger group, and [Sandy] brought her back and said, "We can't because these are the givens that we were handed. Later we can bring it up to the larger group if we want to change something." Which I thought was good because that goes back to that rule thing. You need some rules, boundaries, or parameters for every group.

At this point, nearly 20 minutes of their allotted time had passed, and Carly ultimately relented to the group. She remained mostly quiet during the remaining 15 minutes as the group hastily planned an activity with little explicit connection to the text.

After this session, in an individual interview, Carly explained her justification for trying to "change the givens" of the small group. Even though the group regularly discussed changing their plans throughout the week, Carly still felt that the students were simply reproducing the structures of traditional schooling. For that reason, she had tried to use the small group time to deliberate about the decision of the large group. She explained her thought process like this:

We keep imposing these things. Teachers love rules, and teachers love structure. And we keep imposing the same rules and structure on ourselves. You know, even though this is supposed to be about revision and negotiation, it is like, "No, we have a rule and a structure, so we have to follow this rule and structure." And it was this feeling of like, if we keep following this rule and structure, we're not going to have any moment. There is nowhere in the schedule that says, let's discuss how we're going to change the rules and structure for today. So I was sort of like, "Wait a minute. Before we go any farther, let's maybe get a feel for this and see if we're on the same ground, so when we come back to the group, we can discuss some of these things." Because otherwise the momentum is going to keep going, and we're going to keep rushing to meet these deadlines. We're going to keep doing the same thing. You know, there's not a rule. There isn't a red button that is going to be pushed if we say, "You know what, we're still working."

Unable to convince her peers in the small group to abandon the plan, Carly brought her concerns to the large group later, during a reflective debriefing session led by the facilitators. During the debriefing session that followed the activities planned by the small groups, Carly suggested that the groups needed more time if they were expected to adequately discuss the text and plan an activity. The facilitators, James and Stacy, echoed this sentiment. After presenting her suggestion and explaining her reasoning behind it, the large group deliberated about the suggested revision. Ultimately, the group agreed that they would keep the format of small-group discussion and planning prior to large-group discussion but that they would allot 45 minutes for small-group work.

During the third and final small-group session, an equilibrium was reached, and Carly's group established a working relationship that promoted engagement with the text and the planning of an experiential activity. At the beginning of the third session, Sandy suggested that the group, in order to avoid the problems from the previous day, should set an agenda with spaces for both discussion and planning. Everyone in the small group agreed to this idea and they decided that the first 15 minutes would be set aside for discussing the chapter without regard for their activity. Following that, they would shift gears toward planning an activity with insights gained from the discussion. Diane, a teacher of over 20 years and a member of the group who had remained quiet during most of the contentious second meeting, felt that the group had worked through their earlier disagreements to establish a working arrangement that honored everyone's needs. She described the progression of the group like this:

Every day it has gotten a lot better. Like, [Tuesday], I mean, we had a little bit of conflict. We just felt so rushed and stressed. I think it was Tuesday when we were doing our second group. That second day was when we were just like, "AHH! We're so rushed." And we have some strong folks. You know, Carly has a strong personality and Sandy too. And I felt like we were having a little bit of conflict, but it wasn't that bad. But [Wednesday] we got it straight. Now, it's all good. But again, that's part of it. As long as we don't get personal and ugly, and I haven't seen any of that.

She went on to explain that the conflict arose from a combination of the personalities and working styles in their group and the “time crunch” during the second session:

Part of it was the time crunch. That was the huge part of it. And I think a lot of us are deep thinkers too. And that was part of it. We wanted to have time to do it right. Not just throw out something. And plus, the second time we said, 15 minutes for [discussion] and 30 minutes for [planning]. I think that helped. It was a totally different experience that third time.

During the small-group sessions, the facilitators did not actively participate in small groups. It was only during the end of the second session that James began observing Carly’s group from a distance because he could see they were experiencing conflict and disagreement. James described their conflict as “hot and heavy” during the second session but resisted the urge to step into the group because he wanted them to work through it on their own. He explained that he sees tension as a structural aspect of the course:

You want to make sure they don’t actually start fighting. But at the same time, that struggle is a large part of how the class is structured. You don’t want them to just fight, but if there is tension, you want that to get channeled in the right direction.

Reflecting on it after the fact, he explained that he was happy that he did not intervene during the small group. Because they were able to work through their conflict and disagreement as a large group during the deliberative debriefing session, James felt they were better off for having gone through the process. He went on to explain that the experience of the struggle was something they could take back with them to their classrooms as they begin to implement the Foxfire Approach. He said, “Whatever it is they figured out in that process, they need to take that back to their classrooms. And I was kind of hoping they learned something about group work.”

Insights into Democratic Teaching

Through the process of making choices about the course, the participants gained valuable insights into democratic education. Many of the participants interviewed shared insightful reflections about how the facilitation approach and the design of the course led them to have simulative experiences of the Foxfire Approach. Diane explained her gradual realization that the course was designed to offer the participants insights into what it is like to be a student in a classroom inspired by the Foxfire Approach:

I started to get it. Like, okay, this is to help us understand what self-directed learning is like and we’re experiencing that frustration and that uncomfortable feeling. There’s a reason for that and I started reading more of the Dewey book and started realizing that’s why we’re doing this. And they’re trying to facilitate and let us have choice. We’re living it, basically. How our students are supposed to feel is how we are supposed to feel. So, I made peace with that.

For Diane, these insights were especially useful because she came into the course hoping to improve her abilities as a facilitator and to develop more innovative ways to facilitate group work among

her students. The experience of struggling with a group to make decisions helped her realize that a group of students can still have meaningful and productive collaboration even if they struggle initially.

Joan expressed a similar realization about her experience working in the group to make decisions democratically. She explained:

I think that whole process that we went through with the group was what Dewey says is going to happen in the real classroom. That [it’s] rigorous, bumpy; it’s not going to be smooth. It’s going to be more work when you do it this way. If it takes people who are supposed educators that much effort to democratically proceed . . . But, on the other hand, one thing I can say is if that is a model of what we’re going to do in the classroom in terms of consensus-building and democracy and the meeting of the minds, in the process, what happens is, it gets better. And I think that’s what happens in the normal classroom. It’s going to get better. You’re going to start off, and you’re going to realize, this person needs this, and they’re not going to be comfortable doing that. And if I rush ahead, this person over here is going to be upset. And this person is going to say, “Fine with me; I’m fine.” So, I think what we did in the group is pretty much what we’re going to do in the classroom.

In that comment, Joan made two important points about democratic education. First, she pointed out that to be successful, this approach takes more work than a more traditional teaching approach. This echoes one of Dewey’s (1998) central arguments in *Experience and Education*. Countering the incorrect notion that “progressive education” is a laissez-faire approach that requires little work on the part of the teacher, Dewey argued that it in fact requires more thought and preparation. Second, Joan pointed out that students will get better at making decisions and working together if given the opportunity to practice democratic skills. These are important insights for teachers attempting to teach democratically because they prepare them for what to expect from students. Like Diane, Joan left the course with a better sense of how a group progresses and gets better at making decisions the longer they work together. She might not have gained these insights on such a deep level had she not experienced disagreement during the democratic process herself, as a student.

Carly also gained valuable insights into democratic education by participating in the sometimes-frustrating deliberation during the Foxfire Course for Teachers. She explained that part of democracy is working through the discomfort of collectively making decisions with people you have disagreements with:

There is a reason why we have an understood social contract. The idea is, like, we recognize that we all have to work together even if it’s uncomfortable. And that’s democracy. You’re part of this group. You’re stuck together. Even if you don’t like what anyone else is saying . . . Part of democracy is that it’s frustrating and you don’t agree and you have to figure out how to make something happen from that.

As Carly’s quote points out, disagreement is often a part of the democratic process. Anyone trying to teach democratically needs to understand this and have a commitment to helping students

work through conflict and disagreement. In the case example shown, Carly was comfortable enough with the process to raise concerns about the group's earlier decision about how to operate the small groups. The provisionality of the course agenda as established during the initial deliberative planning session coupled with the regular deliberative debriefing sessions created a space for Carly to share her perspective and reasons for holding it. As a result, the large group was able to reach a decision about how to allocate time that was mutually acceptable.

Findings

Even when the participants are not debating controversial issues but rather making collective decisions about how to approach collaborative learning, their different opinions and educational needs often result in conflict and disagreement about how to proceed. When given power to make decisions, students become invested and care enough to deliberate. As evident in this study, participants with different expectations and working styles can powerfully disagree about how to proceed when given some control over the educational process. Teacher educators should expect this result and view it as a potential benefit for teaching *about* democratic education and promoting deliberative teaching techniques.

Finding 1

By experiencing conflict and disagreement during deliberative decision-making, participants gain insight into facilitating democratic education in their own classrooms.

During interviews with the high school teachers in the small group, most of the participants expressed that the growth of their group's functioning helped them understand how their students will experience deliberation in democratic education. From the perspective of teacher education, this is a valuable insight. By giving teachers and teacher candidates sustained opportunities to make collective decisions through deliberation, we increase the likelihood that they will encounter disagreement with their peers and experience frustration with the process. This is a good thing because it highlights what their students will often experience in democratic classrooms. This offers them insights into how to support their students and view deliberation skills as amenable to improvement with sustained practice.

The participants' insights into the process were deepened by the features of the course that allowed for them to raise concerns and deliberate about how to ensure that everyone was involved in the decision-making process. By deciding to approach the planning in a provisional, piecemeal way, the participants adopted a course structure that was more conducive to deliberation. This ensured that the group would need to revisit the question of how to plan the course activities at regular intervals. In the absence of this structure, disagreements may not have surfaced, and dissatisfied members of the group may have felt uncomfortable raising their concerns. As a result, they may have left the experience feeling unheard and less confident in democratic teaching approaches.

In the case of this session of the Foxfire Course for Teachers, participants experienced that conflict and disagreement is not

evidence of failure of democratic teaching. Rather, it is a common feature of teaching wherein students are empowered to make decisions with real consequences. If provided with structures that promote further deliberation and reflection on past decisions, a group of students in a democratic setting can learn how to make better decisions that satisfy both the course requirements and the needs of the participants.

Finding 2

Facilitators of democratic teaching can support their students by providing reflective spaces to debrief on past decisions and exercising restraint in the face of conflict and disagreement.

During the conflict over the *Experience and Education* chapter discussions, the facilitators exercised restraint although they were aware of the conflict the small group of high school teachers were experiencing. Instead of stepping in and solving the problem for the teachers, the facilitators encouraged regular debriefing sessions that highlighted the provisionality of the plans they had made. Through this process, the group could share their experiences with their initial plan as it unfolded and revise it based on the needs and desires of the group.

In other sessions of the course, the facilitators were not as intentional about modeling reflection and encouraging participants to debrief and revise earlier decisions (Harell, 2019). During those sessions, some participants experienced conflict; however, their concerns never became public issues that were deliberated upon by the whole group. As a result, many remained unresolved. This was not the case with Carly's group in this study. She felt comfortable enough in the classroom to raise her concerns and there was a space intentionally designed for discussing how to improve the process by reflecting on past experiences. Although she was incredibly frustrated at points during the earlier small-group's book discussions and open conflict occurred among her fellow group members, the facilitators resisted the urge to step in or stop the conflict. They were confident in this course of action because they had previously developed structures in place that would allow the group to revisit their plans and express their desires about how to proceed. Importantly, these debriefing sessions brought together diverse perspectives on how the course was unfolding. This created a space for Carly's group not only to continue to deliberate about how to structure the small group sessions but also to hear from other groups who did not experience any conflict or have any open disagreements.

Conclusion

Learning how to participate in deliberative democracy is a developmental process. Teachers who have experienced the struggle of deliberating, the conflict that arises, and the process of conflict resolution will be better at supporting students who will likely struggle with it initially. A democratic educator needs to understand that people get better at deliberating and making decisions together with practice and support. Otherwise, they will have low expectations for their students and give up easily when difficulties start to arise. If we care about democracy in education, we need to give teachers opportunities to practice democracy.

To work toward attaining the normative criteria of deliberative democracy is not to create a space where no conflict or disagreement occurs. The vagueness that accompanies discussions of “democratic education” can lead to humane education that aims to approximate student desires and make them feel comfortable at all times. In contrast, deliberative democratic education gives power to students. When students are empowered to make collective decisions in the classroom, we should anticipate that conflict and disagreement will sometimes emerge. We cannot perfectly anticipate where or how this conflict and disagreement will arise. We can, however, plan for it by opening up spaces for reflection and exercising restraint. Because revealing disagreement is fundamental to democracy, we should view these sometimes-uncomfortable experiences as part of democratic learning.

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